DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 527 CE 053 719

TITLE Profiles of Adult Learners.
INSTITUTION Illinois State Library, Springfield.
PUB DATE Sep 88
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Reading Programs; *Adult Students; Community Colleges; *Literacy Education; *Outcomes of Education; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; *Student Characteristics; *Success; Tutoring; Tutors; Two Year Colleges; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS *Illinois

ABSTRACT

Since January 1986, when the Illinois Secretary of State Literacy Grant Program began funding a wide variety of adult literacy programs, more than 30,000 students have sought help with reading. They have been matched with 25,000 tutors who have provided more than 2 million hours of volunteer instruction. The profiles in this booklet are stories of 12 students who had the courage to change their lives, with help from tutors who believed they could. The following adults (and their respective literacy programs) are profiled: (1) Bill, a farmer--Frontier Community College Literacy Program, Fairfield; (2) Laurel, a self-employed seamstress--Rockford Area Literacy Council; (3) Guillermo, a factory supervisor--Elgin YWCA; (4) Iris, a homemaker--Youth Services Project, Inc., Chicago; (5) Donnie, a bus driver--Five-County Adult Education Program, Cairo; (6) Minnie, a school cook--John Wood Community College, Quincy; (7) Jim, a service department leader--Morton College, Cicero; (8) Billy, a construction worker--McLean/DeWitt Regional Office of Education, Bloomington; (9) Connie, a part-time employee--Belleville Community College; (10) Dorothy, a factory worker--Waubonsee Community College, Aurora; (11) Christine, a concerned parent--Spoon River College, Canton; and (12) Howard, a maintenance worker--Secretary of State In-house Literacy Program, Springfield. The stories are illustrated with quotations from the adult students and photographs. The address and telephone number of each literacy program are provided. (KC)

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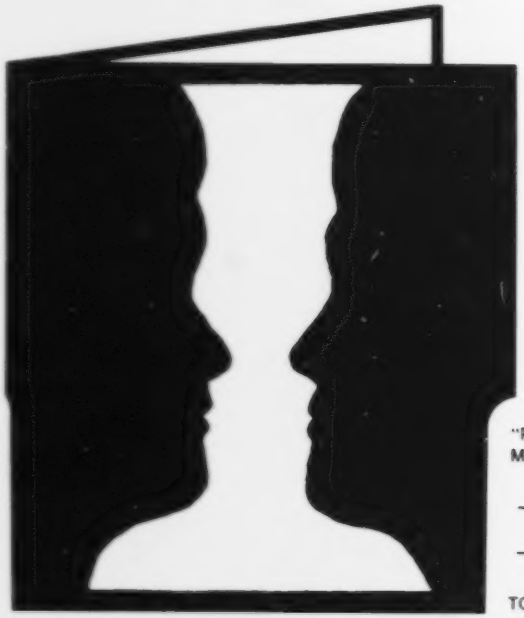
PROFILES

OF ADULT LEARNERS



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**IS THE ILLINOIS LITERACY EFFORT MAKING A DIFFERENCE?
PROFILES OF ADULT LEARNERS SHED SOME LIGHT.**

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Secretary of State Literacy Office
Illinois State Library

Jim Edgar • Secretary of State and State Librarian

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PROFILES OF ADULT LEARNERS

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Printed by Authority of the
State of Illinois
September 1988 — 8M — GA-1742

Introduction

It is not easy for an adult in need of reading instruction to come forward for help. For many, facing the problem and deciding to do something about it is the most difficult part of the journey toward literacy.

What gives these individuals the courage to come forward and the determination to change their lives? It may be the desire to be a better parent, concern about employability or job advancement, or the wish to lead a fuller, more independent life. It might have to do with the death of a spouse and the sudden need to handle finances and correspondence. In many cases, it is the culmination of a long-held wish to read scripture.

Since January 1986, when the Secretary of State Literacy Grant Program began funding a wide variety of adult literacy programs, more than 30,000 students have come forward for reading help. They have been matched with 25,000 tutors who have provided more than two million hours of volunteer instruction.

A network of 250 adult literacy volunteer programs is active in Illinois, recruiting students and volunteer tutors. Once trained, the tutors work with adult students, one-on-one or in small groups, to help raise reading levels. An estimated two million adults are in need of reading help.

The profiles that follow are stories of students who had the courage to change their lives with help from tutors who knew they could.

Joan Seamon
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Background

Over the last three years, more than $10 million has been awarded to adult volunteer literacy programs in Illinois through the Secretary of State Literacy Grant Program and the Illinois State Library. An additional $4 million will be allocated in Fiscal Year 1989.

Literacy grants have been awarded to:

- Libraries and library systems
- Community colleges
- School districts
- Regional Offices of Education
- Illinois Literacy Hotline
- Community-based organizations
- Alternative schools
- Correctional facilities
- Literacy Volunteers of America - IL
- Laubach Literacy Action - IL

The Literacy Office in the Illinois State Library administers the Secretary of State Literacy Grant Program and coordinates the activities of the Illinois Literacy Council. Chaired by Secretary of State and State Librarian Jim Edgar, the Illinois Literacy Council provides visibility and serves as a forum for discussion and planning. The council is composed of 36 representatives from state agencies, the library and education communities, community-based organizations and various private sector interests.

Close cooperation at the state level has been replicated at the local level, as more than 150 local and regional literacy councils have been created to promote public awareness and support local literacy programs. A network of 250 adult literacy programs provides one-on-one and small group tutoring in every Illinois county through the use of trained volunteer tutors.

Facts and Figures

Functional Illiteracy

The inability to function effectively in everyday life, at home or in the workplace.

Functional Illiterate

An adult whose reading, writing, and computing skills are below the 6th grade level.

Illiterate Population – National

An estimated 23 million adults are functionally illiterate. An additional 45 million adults are marginally literate with only minimal reading, writing, and computing skills which measure at or below the 9th grade level.

U.S. Department of Education
Adult Performance Level (APL) Study 1975

By the year 2000, it is estimated a person will need at least 11th grade skills to function effectively in society.

U.S. Department of Education

The number of adult illiterates increases by 2.2 million each year, largely due to the high number of high school dropouts.

U.S. Department of Education

The United States ranks 49th among member nations of the United Nations in literacy.

National Coalition for Literacy

Illiterate Population – Illinois

An estimated 2 million adults in Illinois are functionally illiterate.

APL Study as applied to 1980 U.S. Census

Illinois ranks 34th in state literacy ratings.

Based upon 1980 U.S. Census figures for percentage of persons who have completed 8th grade

Bill

"'Tractors and combines are computerized now. They tell you what's wrong, but if you can't read the words that are flashing, it doesn't help at all.'"

Bill came to the Frontier Community College literacy program in November 1986 at age 49. He expressed interest in learning to read better so he could improve his job skills. He is employed by a large farming operation in Southern Illinois.

"I've farmed for 35 years and it got to where I just couldn't do it," said Bill, who has had four or more men working under him over the years. "It's pretty bad when you have to tell workers what to do and they're smarter than you!" he exclaimed.

"We went to Wisconsin on vacation one year with another couple and I couldn't have gotten up there if it hadn't been for the people with me. They showed me the way. That's when I decided I was going to do something. But mostly because of my work, I decided to get help. It just got to bothering me so much – the fact that I couldn't do my job anymore."

"Tractors and combines are computerized now," Bill explained. "They tell you what's wrong, but if you can't read the words that are flashing, it doesn't help at all."

Buying parts in a farm supply store was hard for Bill. "One time I went to buy a part and they charged me for two and I signed the ticket and didn't even notice it. My boss caught it when he paid the bill. Before, I always worried whether I did things right. Now I don't worry as much as I did. I look up numbers in the phone book, which I couldn't do before. I read the newspaper and mail. I used to just let my wife look at it."

"My boss says he can tell I've improved 100 percent. I can read an instructional manual for tractors and combines now. I think other people notice a difference in me too and it seems they have more confidence in me."

Blenda Demaret
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Laurel (right) and volunteer tutor Marge Casson

"Laurel had to deal in cash in her business because she could not write checks easily. She could not read maps or road signs or the notes her boys brought home from school."

Laurel Schrupp is a real "go-getter." She owns her own business, "Fashion Fingers by Lori," leads a Boy Scout troop, manages a household with two young sons and a husband, and sees two tutors for reading and math.

In first and second grade, Laurel felt "dumb" because she couldn't learn her letters, and she sensed that an uncaring teacher did not want to take the time to teach her. By fourth grade, she knew she had a problem. Then, aided by her parents, she was passed from grade to grade without learning the skills she needed. In the 11th grade, she dropped out of school.

Laurel had to deal in cash in her business because she could not write checks easily. She could not read maps or road signs or the notes her boys brought home from school. Finally she called the literacy hotline, and after waiting for four months, was assigned a tutor. With the tutor's help, Laurel improved her reading skills by two grades in just five months. Her goal is to attend Rock Valley College. She is interested in business, computers, and electronics.

Laurel gives her tutor a five-star rating. "I couldn't have done it without her," she said.

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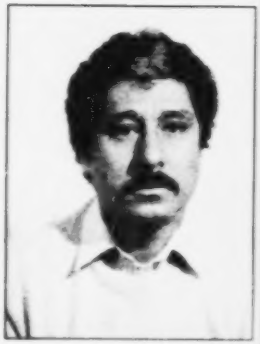

Guillermo

> *"'Then [my employer] gave me the opportunity to be a supervisor, because I learn more and more English. Now I supervise 20 people. That's why I keep coming to the YWCA – to learn more and more.'"*

Guillermo came to the United States 12 years ago to live in Aurora. He had attended school for only three years in Mexico and he spoke no English.

With the help of a bilingual friend, Guillermo found a job at a hotel restaurant in the area. Because he could not read English, he could not fill out the application. So another employee helped him.

The restaurant had a policy of providing daily meals for their employees. All Guillermo had to do was order whatever he wanted from the kitchen. However, he could not read the menu. Someone suggested that he ask for "hot dog" and then hold up his fingers to show how many he wanted. For the first two weeks there, the only thing he ate was hot dogs.

Eventually, Guillermo left the restaurant job to join his brother in maintenance work. His boss spoke Spanish, as did his fellow workers. While he worked there, Guillermo had no incentive to learn English.

In 1983, Guillermo married and moved to Elgin, where he found a manufacturing job. He soon found he had to speak and read English. A friend at work told him about the English classes at the Elgin YWCA, where he could get help with reading, conversation, and writing skills. As his skills improved, he began to understand how important English was to him.

"I was a machine operator for two or three years. Then they gave me the opportunity to be a supervisor, because I learn more and more English. Now I supervise 20 people. That's why I keep coming to the YWCA – to learn more and more. Now I know what I want. I don't have to depend on another person. I can read and write English."

Linda Petty
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Iris and daughter

"When you meet Iris, you know that this is a woman who really wants to learn. With her drive and intelligence, there is nothing that should stop her from finishing her studies, getting her GED and eventually going on to college."

At an early age, Iris began living in foster homes. Because her life was so unstable, she never had the opportunity to get an education. At the age of sixteen she realized that something inside of her wanted to learn. She asked all of the kids she knew to give her their old school books. At night she would try to go through the books and do the exercises, but since there was nobody to correct her, she did not know if she was doing them correctly.

Now she is twenty-two years old with three children. About six months ago something inside of her snapped. She finally picked up one of the cards given to her by Public Aid and called Youth Service Project, Inc., about their literacy program. She came in for an interview and was linked with a tutor who was willing to come to her home, so Iris would not have to leave her children. She has been working steadily ever since, and in five months has raised her reading level almost two grades. Her tutor insists that Iris' great progress is due to her burning desire to learn. She never has to motivate Iris to study. In fact, she says it's hard to keep up with her.

Iris has noticed the difference in her day-to-day life due to her improved reading skills. She can now read some magazine articles and recipes and feels that now she will be able to help her children with their studies. Recently, she wrote her first letter to a sister she has never met. She hopes to make contact with other brothers and sisters by writing to them, too.

When you meet Iris, you know that this is a woman who really wants to learn. With her drive and intelligence, there is nothing that should stop her from finishing her studies, getting her GED and eventually going on to college. She has a hard road ahead, but she got over the most difficult step of making the phone call that would start her education.

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Donnie and head teacher Jan Broadway

Donnie is a tall man with wire-rimmed glasses and an easy, warm smile. The smile comes quickly when he is asked about his reading lessons. He believes the local literacy program has been responsible for a big improvement in his life. "If it hadn't been for this program, I wouldn't be where I am now. I wouldn't be able to read like I can right now. And I wouldn't have my bus license."

The Class C Special Bus Permit that he received recently obviously means a great deal to him. It holds out the promise of a real job. It wasn't easy for him to pass the driver's test for the bus permit. He had tried it and failed. But that was before he started with the literacy program at the adult education center in Metropolis. It was before he had Debbie Cuttrell as a volunteer literacy tutor.

"Donnie's new skills have made it possible for him to read road signs, shop for groceries more carefully, and write letters to his 15-year-old who lives in northern Illinois."

It was almost three years ago that he first heard about the adult education center. A neighbor who had been studying there told him about it, and he decided to try it. His first test showed a reading level of about second grade. He couldn't read much of anything, and he showed his discomfort in the classroom by taking a corner seat and keeping to himself. Two years ago Debbie started working with him. Now his test scores place him at the fifth grade level.

Donnie's new skills have made it possible for him to read road signs, shop for groceries more carefully, and write letters to his 15-year-old who lives in northern Illinois. Being able to do these things makes him feel good.

Asked what advice he would give to new students in the literacy program, he answered quickly, "I'd tell them not to quit. Just stay in there. It may take a few years, but it'll all come."

Pat Orsburn
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Minnie and volunteer tutor Dorothy Bizer

> *"'I've always had a job, but without education I've had no career.'"*

Minnie moved to Quincy 10 years ago to live with her brother, who had suffered a heart attack. She brought her baby son with her and has lived here ever since.

Minnie grew up in Kentucky. She was the eldest child of a sickly mother who eventually died of cancer when Minnie was 17. "I didn't go to school often; I couldn't. My mother was sick and needed me," she explained. "I was always behind in school and in 9th grade I finally quit altogether."

Minnie is currently employed as a school cook at a local college and as a counselor at a home for abused women and children. Minnie said, "I've always had a job, but without education I've had no career."

Minnie has attended adult education classes for three years. But when she first began going to classes, she complained that "something" was missing. The tutor-student relationship was suggested and the "something" was found. "Tutoring is interesting – it's not really like school, it's like having a great conversation. And it's more understandable like that. It's not like teaching, but then again it is. It's faster," Minnie said.

She has set a short term goal of completing a program on Food Service Sanitation. She credits her tutor with helping to build confidence. Minnie feels good about herself and is determined to complete her GED and get on with her career. She still gets nervous at times, especially when a new level of words is introduced, but said, "I'm moving up step by step. I'm confident I'm going to get my GED and go on to college. I feel greedy about education. Once you get a bit of it, you want more. It's like good food."

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Jim's volunteer tutor Lyle Caines

"Jim had tried to hide his inability to read, but soon had to admit to himself that he could not read well enough to qualify for or cope with a promotion within the company."

Jim, a 31-year-old Cicero resident, has been enrolled in Morton College Project C.A.R.E. for approximately one year. He has made impressive progress, increasing both his reading and comprehension levels.

Jim's motivation for enrolling in the literacy program was to improve his reading ability in order to further his advancement potential in the company for which he works. Jim had tried to hide his inability to read, but soon had to admit to himself that he could not read well enough to qualify for or cope with a promotion within the company.

Jim has drive and determination, two qualities which his employer recognized and which have helped him to succeed in increasing his reading ability. Jim's employer encouraged him to enroll in Project C.A.R.E., recognizing that Jim possesses qualities which make him a valuable employee.

With the help of a dedicated tutor, Lyle Caines, Jim has raised his reading level from the third to the seventh grade level and accepted a promotion within the company, moving up the ladder from machinery cleaner to group leader in the plant's services department.

"As I began to learn how to read better, I began to feel more confident in my ability to succeed," Jim said. "I feel fortunate to have received tutoring because I perform my job better. Also, I've noticed a definite improvement in my spelling and writing."

Although Jim is moving out of the area, he plans to continue his education at a college near his new home. "I wish other people who have difficulty reading would take advantage of tutoring programs. A person should not be afraid to admit that he can't read. A person has everything to gain – and nothing to lose!"

George Russo
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Billy and volunteer tutor Janene Scott

"The daughter who threatened to quit high school is staying in school. 'I've given her incentive. She is so proud of me,' Billy said."

Students return to school for a variety of reasons. Billy's daughter threatened to quit high school if he did not go back to school to obtain his GED.

Billy had been working at a construction job for many years to support his five children. His wife was also employed. Last year, he suffered a back injury and suddenly, at age 40, was without a job.

Not comfortable collecting disability, and motivated by a desire to be a good role model for his daughter, Billy knew he had to get his GED to obtain employment. It had been 24 years since he had been in a classroom. Not feeling very confident, he signed up for a reading class. "I was embarrassed after all those years of being out. . . I didn't think I could read, but I got there and they showed me I could."

When he began with the program, Billy read at the fifth grade level. He was placed with a tutor and together they began to work on pre-GED skills. In a short time, he passed the Constitution test. In his first try at the GED test, he missed by 4 points. Billy was disappointed, but he was not daunted and began a daily ritual of reading in his books and taking practice tests. He plans on taking the GED reading test again soon. He feels very confident that he can make up the points.

The daughter who threatened to quit high school is staying in school. "I've given her incentive. She is so proud of me," Billy said. He is very upfront about telling others who think they have a reading problem, "Go to class. Don't feel embarrassed or ashamed. Go get the help you need."

Joyce Fritsch
Program Coordinator
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Connie and her mother, Mary Bell, (seated) and volunteer tutors Kay Jones and Maxine Strecker (standing left to right)

"With this reading improvement, Connie has been able to get a part-time job, a first for her."

When Connie enrolled in an adult education reading class at Belleville Area College, she had no idea it would also affect her four-year-old son and her 51-year-old mother. The literacy coordinator visited her reading class to tell the students about the literacy tutoring. Connie made an appointment with the coordinator to request a tutor.

During the two years that she has been tutored, her reading has improved three grade levels. With this reading improvement, Connie has been able to get a part-time job, a first for her. She has enrolled her son, Bradley, in an at-risk child care learning program recommended by her tutor. She has talked her mother into having a tutor and then enrolling in an ABE reading class.

Since enrolling Bradley in the at-risk preschool program, Connie has seen a change in her son. Not only has his social behavior improved, he has become more verbal and inquisitive, which will increase his chances of success when he begins his elementary education.

As a literacy coordinator, it is very rewarding to know that this program has helped mother and grandmother become better role models and the child become better equipped to take advantage of future educational opportunities.

Bobbie True
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Dorothy (left) and volunteer tutor Bobbie Bodor

> ***"'You have to be prepared for the future . . . . Plants close. You are able to get a better job if you have an education.'"***

Dorothy grew up the daughter of a sharecropper in Mississippi. She was only able to attend school during bad weather. Otherwise, she was expected to work in the fields. Before long, the younger children started catching up with her in school. When they passed her by, she lost interest in learning and dropped out.

After the death of both parents, Dorothy raised her siblings. She married, had three children of her own and, in 1966, moved to the Chicago area.

Somehow she got by, reading at second grade level. She was able to manage the family budget and hold a job. But she wanted to read better. It bothered her that she couldn't help her children with homework or read a story to her grandson.

"First I bought spelling books, a dictionary and a reading book and tried to teach myself," she recounted. "That's hard to do because you have no one to tell you when you are wrong."

Then she heard about Waubonsee Community College Adult Literacy Program and began studying with a volunteer tutor. They've been meeting once a week for more than a year now.

The local manufacturing company where she works recently became computerized. After training for a week she was able to pass tests to qualify for what amounted to a promotion. She doesn't think she could have done it without the skills she gained through tutoring sessions.

Dorothy is reading the newspaper now and reading to the youngsters at home. She is seeing a whole new world open up to her.

"You have to be prepared for the future," she remarked. "Plants close. You are able to get a better job if you have an education. My goal is to get my high school diploma. I just want to further my education."

Connie Dickson
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Christine

"It was Christine's distress at being unable to assist her academically failing fifth grade daughter that prompted her to ask for a tutor. She strongly felt the need to understand her children's schoolwork."

Shortly after I attended a Rushville literacy volunteer tutor training session, I was assigned a 31-year-old student. My student, Christine, has no telephone or car. She has five young children. I travel to her home. The more I get to know Christine, the more my admiration for her grows. She completed the ninth grade in special education. She did not finish high school because of a series of traumatic events – including moves from town to town, family breakup, and her mother's desertion.

It was Christine's distress at being unable to assist her academically failing fifth grade daughter that prompted her to ask for a tutor. She strongly felt the need to understand her children's schoolwork. I made the decision, shortly after we met, in June to put aside the basic reading tutor materials and to try teaching Christine from elementary textbooks. I have a teaching degree and public school teaching experience. Our junior high principal gave us permission to borrow the books for summer study.

I am happy to report that Christine's daughter's grades have markedly improved. The principal continues to support us and reports the daughter's social problems from last year have all but disappeared. Christine feels that her understanding, attention, and encouragement have made the difference. Recently, we made a trip to the library, where she learned how to locate books, chose a book to read herself for a report, and took several to read to her children.

Christine works hard, trying to stay ahead of her daughter in language, social studies, and math. Her homework is always done, as well as optional assignments I've given from time to time. She feels good about her abilities and accomplishments. She talks now of getting her GED someday. In her own words... "I thought I was gonna be a dumbbell. But I'm really learning a lot and I enjoy it! I feel like a kid again." As for me, I feel I'm involved in something pretty important – changing a life.

Linda Peters
Literacy Volunteer Tutor
Lorraine Farr, Literacy Coordinator
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Howard (left) with Secretary of State Edgar and volunteer tutor Lorretta Law

Howard was in his mid-50's when he decided to do something about his inability to read. Like many adult students, Howard had successfully hidden his problem from friends and neighbors. When a co-worker at the Secretary of State's office mentioned that he was getting reading help at work, Howard enrolled in the program and began daily tutoring sessions. Months later at a reception honoring him as Employee of the Month, Howard's secret became public knowledge when he used the occasion to thank his tutor and Jim Edgar for the in-house literacy program. He's now become a "literacy celebrity" in central Illinois, repeatedly telling his story in hopes of reaching others.

Howard's formal education in a rural elementary school ended around fourth grade. A sickly child, he missed many school days and slept through most of the classes he attended. Once he was out of school and working, his health improved. His natural ability with numbers as well as a gift for memorizing details enabled him to do well at a variety of jobs, none of which required the ability to read.

"At a reception honoring him as Employee of the Month, Howard's secret became public knowledge when he used the occasion to thank his tutor and Jim Edgar for the in-house literacy program."

It was during the time he spent in the military service that Howard began to realize feelings of isolation and dependence. A buddy helped him read letters from home and aided his attempts at "very simple" return letters. He painfully recalls those early struggles and, with a twinkle in his eyes, mentions that he just completed a multi-page letter to the mission his church supports. Having served 12 years as a deacon, Howard was just elected to a second term as church treasurer, an accomplishment he points to with pride, since it requires writing as well as reading.

The daily tutoring sessions have ended, but Howard continues to read. Today, as he read and signed the release-of-claim form required of those featured in this booklet, Howard commented: "This is a good example of how reading has changed my life. Several years ago I signed a bank judgment **against myself**! Now, even though I can't read every single legal-type word, I can sign this form with confidence."

Connie Miller
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For referral of students and volunteers to literacy programs, contact:

Illinois Literacy Hotline
(800) 321-9511

Greater Chicago Literacy Hotline
(312) 939-8600
(Serving Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake and Will Counties)